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Elementary School Meets University

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Elementary school meets university

Partnership in South Carolina leads to better training for current and future teachers and better writing instruction for students

BY RACHEL COLLOPY AND PATSY BOWMAN

When school districts and universities combine their strengths, both benefit. Like teaching hospitals associated with medical schools, professional development schools (PDSs) train future practitioners, develop state-of-the-art practices, and nurture professional growth. Schools benefit from sustained professional development focused on their unique needs. Teacher preparation programs benefit from exemplary placements for student teachers and the wisdom of current practitioners. Both gain from joint research into innovative practices and the cross-fertilization of ideas.

When Fort Mill (S.C.) Elementary School and Winthrop University collaborated, we secured nearly $14,000 in grant money, developed effective professional development for teaching writing, and saw students' test scores rise. Concurrently, we conducted school-based research to inform our efforts and modeled exemplary writing instruction for student teachers. The work we began is now benefiting other schools in the district.

GETTING STARTED

Many PDSs start as bottom-up relationships between individual professors and school-based educators who share common interests. University web sites, personal connections, and recommendations from the dean of education may all yield potential university partners. The trust and rapport developed in these bottom-up partnerships bolster flexible and creative collaboration and can sustain it through the discomfort that comes with change. However, without institutional recognition, the potential longevity and impact of these entrepreneurial efforts are limited.

Other PDSs begin with that institutional recognition. Formal agreements between one or more colleges of education and school districts fortify PDSs against changes in personnel and policies. They ensure that PDS activities are recognized as essential to the mission of both institutions. Agreements also establish broad goals, detail joint and equitable governance structures, and spell out each partner's obligations and expectations.

No two PDSs are structured exactly alike. Our PDS, for example, grew from a long-established consortium of six school districts and Winthrop University. A committee of consortium representatives, Winthrop faculty, and public school faculty selected one PDS from each school district after a lengthy application process.

The school districts agree not to move PDS principals for at least three years and to support the partnerships through personnel and financial resources. Schools agree to accept preservice teachers at different levels of development, collaborate with Winthrop faculty to enhance K-12 instruction and teacher education, and participate in select inquiry projects aimed at improving learning, teaching, and schooling. Winthrop's obligations include providing faculty liaisons and supervising preservice teachers, assisting with professional development, and providing other resources equivalent to at least $4,000 per PDS.

When designing institutional agreements, clarify the costs, as well as the benefits, to each partner. Money must be allotted to support improvement activities and for travel between the university and school to investigate innovations in other school districts, as well as to attend professional conferences. The resource of time also should be considered. Administrators need time to communicate with each other. Teachers need released time to collaborate, write grants, supervise student teachers, and for professional development. Because work with PDSs is labor-intensive, many universities reduce the faculty liaisons' college course load. In addition, Winthrop University and its partner districts support a full-time PDS coordinator. Costs, of course, vary over time and with the needs of the specific PDS.

When designing institutional agreements, clarify the costs, as well as the benefits, to each partner.

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POWER BROKERS

Institutional agreements require the commitment of the key power brokers within each organization. District superintendents, university presidents, and education deans allot

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- *Assessing the Impacts of Professional Development Schools,* by Lee Teitel (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2000).
- *Designing Professional Development School Governance Structures,* by Lee Teitel (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1998).
- *Like Stone Soup: The Role of the Professional Development School in the Renewal of Urban Schools,* by Peter C. Murrell Jr. (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education 1998).
- *Making Professional Development Schools Work: Politics, Practices, and Policy,* by Marsha Levine & Roberta Trachtman (Eds.) (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
- *Professional Development Schools: Combining School Improvement and Teacher Preparation,* by Lucindia Chance (Ed.) (Washington, DC: NEA Professional Library, 2000).
- *Resources on Professional Development Schools : An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide,* by Ismat Adbal-Haqq (Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2000).

resources and ensure that PDS efforts are rewarded as integral rather than marginalized activities. At universities, for example, tenure and promotion decisions are traditionally based on publishing research and university teaching and, to a lesser extent, service. Such policies inadvertently discourage tenure-track faculty from spending time working intensively with schools.

A district's director of curriculum and instruction can hinder or enhance a PDS's impact. Our district curriculum coordinator dipped into her department's budget to buy additional materials to support PDS efforts. Personnel directors know which teachers may make strong mentors. At the university, deans of arts and sciences, visual and performing arts, and other disciplines can encourage subject matter experts and students to participate.

Even with the most carefully crafted institutional agreement, PDSs don't hit the ground running. We discovered that it takes time to develop working relationships.

In addition, the school and university faculty should have input into the development of the PDS agreement. In the beginning, leadership may come from a core group of interested professors, principals, and lead teachers who are respected by their colleagues. These professionals will be at the heart of PDS work.

School principals have a pivotal role in forming and creating an effective PDS. Principals rally the faculty's enthusiasm for becoming a PDS. They shape a climate that integrates preservice teachers and university faculty into the school community. Throughout the relationship, the principal must continue to keep the faculty updated on current PDS activities and focused on meeting the PDS goals. Principals creatively allocate resources (time, money, and people) and need to stay aware of teacher concerns. Change will be exciting for some, uncomfortable and even threatening for others.

DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS

Even with the most carefully crafted institutional agreement, PDSs don't hit the ground running. We discovered that it takes time to develop working relationships. Turning the broad PDS vision into concrete action began with several months of listening, talking, and learning about each other. Rachel Collopy (the university liaison and one of the authors) attended grade-level team meetings and staff meetings, ate lunch with teachers in the cafeteria, worked with mentor teachers to supervise student teachers, and met with the principal and the PDS committee. For quite a while, however, she felt like an outsider with a free hall pass.

At the same time, Patsy Bowman (one of the authors) and many of the teachers wondered exactly what Collopy was doing in their school. The discussions for the PDS application felt like a distant memory. Now that it was a reality, the teachers did not have a clear picture of how it would work. Nudged by the principal, Collopy and two master teachers, Bowman and Ruth Boetsch, wrote a grant to improve writing instruction. During the hours spent writing and revising the grant proposal, we developed specific goals and a plan of action for our partnership.

GOALS AND NEEDS

As we shaped our proposal, we took into account data on student achievement. Our students scored 20 percentage points lower on the state's standardized language arts test than students in the district's other schools.

We surveyed the teachers and found 71% had never completed a college-level writing course and 96% felt they were not very knowledgeable or highly effective in assessing student writing. Clearly, to improve student achievement and preservice training, we first needed to address the faculty's need for knowledge and confidence in writing instruction.

BUILD CONSENSUS (AGAIN)

Grant money in hand, a core group of teachers along with the principal, curriculum coordinator, and university liaison designed coherent and sustained professional development. Equally as important, we planned how to develop teacher buy-in.

First, we began the professional development by discussing how it responded to teachers' needs. Teachers in South Carolina, like others across the country, feel pressure from state-mandated testing. Terry Murray, the principal, spent time explaining how the approach would enhance teachers' previous work in language arts and support the state's writing rubric.

Next we used teachers as catalysts for change. Together Bowman and Boetsch had more than five decades of experience teaching students and supporting teachers in almost all of the school's classrooms on almost a daily basis. They had credibility with fellow teachers. In response to teachers' requests, professional learning sessions were held during the school day instead of after school or on weekends. Teachers who completed all the training and planning sessions received recertification credit from Winthrop University.

We encouraged teachers to share what they had done between sessions. Teachers had specifically asked for time to share during the workshops. We knew that as teachers shared, they would become models for others. They would testify to potential impact of the approach in this school with these kids. As teachers worked in grade-level teams to develop long-range plans and a bank of writing lessons, they built consensus on the school's approach to writing instruction.

ASSESS PROGRESS

Assessing progress is often neglected but is a critical piece of educational improvement. It tells you whether what you are doing is having the intended impact and supports research on partnership activities. While many teachers feel pressure to have students perform well on standardized tests, most professors feel pressure to publish. Sustaining partnerships between schools and universities requires recognizing and supporting the benchmarks that matter in each other's institutional cultures.

What did we find out from our assessment? Teachers rated their own ability to teach each aspect of writing more highly after the professional development than before. Student achievement also improved. For example, the number of 3rd graders scoring below proficient on state tests dropped by 20 percentage points in the first year.

DISTRICT IMPACT

What started at one PDS is now having a districtwide impact. The original Fort Mill Elementary no longer exists. However, teacher transfers to newly built schools spread the enthusiasm as well as the knowledge built in our PDS.

Since 2001, Winthrop has offered district teachers three graduate credit courses based on our work. Given the outcomes for student achievement, district administrators are committed to having all K-5 teachers trained in the next three years. □

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